SOUTH FLORIDA AFFILIATION SWITCHES OF 1989

1. BACKSTORY

The story of the late 1980s network affiliation swap in South Florida began in 1980 and would serve as a preview of sorts of the domino toppling that began five years later as a result of FOX winning NFL coverage rights. But first, South Florida.

By the middle of the 20th century, Miami had grown to roughly half a million residents, many of whom had recently served in World War II - where over 100,000 servicemen and women trained in the South Florida region. However, the Cuban Revolution that saw Fulgencio Batista toppled by the Communist revolutionaries led by Fidel Castro would soon result in large numbers of Cubans fleeing 90 miles north to Miami - 100,000 alone in 1965. Additionally, large numbers of Haitian refugees fled to Miami during the 1980s as well, resulted in ethnic strife in a city that - as a result - had a large number of black and Hispanic residents.

That strife would then boil over in late 1979, when on December 17; a black retired Marine and salesman named Arthur McDuffie - riding his motorcycle with a suspended license due to accumulated

traffic citation, led a high-speed police chase where four officers - Ira Diggs; William Hanlon; Michael Watts and Alex Marrero; all of whom happened to be white - caught him after McDuffie lost control of his motorcycle, leading to a scuffle that ended with McDuffie's skull being fractured to a degree that the prosecutor described as being cracked "like an egg".

McDuffie died from his injuries four days later, and the officers were indicted on manslaughter, tampering with or fabricating physical evidence; with the trial moved to Tampa. Presiding over the trial was judge Lenore Carrero Nesbitt with the lead prosecutor being then-Miami-Dade County State Attorney (and future U.S. Attorney General) Janet Reno. The officers were ultimately acquitted on May 8, 1980. Nine days later, riots broke out in the mostly black Overtown and Liberty City neighborhoods; lasting from May 17-20 and resulting in 18 deaths, 350 injuries and 600 arrests before things quieted down.

Additionally, while Miami's population explosion during the decade led to it being viewed as a glamour city with the success of productions such as the 1984-89 NBC series "Miami Vice"; the city was also becoming a major point of entry for drug trafficking, particularly cocaine, resulting in that city being viewed as "Ground Zero" in the War on Drugs.

2. STATIONS IMPACTED

There are four stations which we will be paying attention to in this video. The listing shows call letters; ownership and affiliations as of 1980

- WTVJ-TV 4 (Wometco Enterprises; CBS)
- WCIX-TV 6 (General Cinema Corporation; independent)
- WCKT-TV 7 (Sunbeam Television; NBC)
- WPLG-TV 10 (Post-Newsweek Stations; ABC)

Of that group, the station affected the least (and being discussed the least) is ABC affiliate WPLG. From here, we'll go into some background for each of the stations.

- WTVJ launched in 1949 as the CBS affiliate, with a team that included the station's original news anchor/commentator/news director Ralph Renick (hired straight from college in 1949; Renick would be employed with the station until 1985, when he left to make a brief, unsuccessful run for the Democratic nomination for Governor in 1986); original weatherman Bob Weaver (who worked at the station until his retirement in 2003 after 54 years

of service); with other prominent employees at the beginning of the period we'll cover including sports anchor Tony Segreto; weekend sports anchor Chris Myers; weekend anchor Bob Mayer; 11:00 weeknight anchor Jim Brosemer and former Skipper Chuck children's show host Chuck Zink.

- WCIX signed on in 1967 and was owned by Coral Television from its inception until General Cinema purchased the company in 1972. It was primarily a general entertainment independent, though bearing some notice for being one of the few non-Kaiser Broadcasting stations to carry The Lou Gordon Program based out of WKBD-TV 50 in Detroit; as well as being one of the first stations offering programming in Spanish as well as English. The station at the time had just reverted once again to being the only general entertainment independent station when WHFT-TV 45 (originally a LeSEA Broadcasting station with a hybrid of Christian broadcasting and general entertainment) was acquired by TBN and flipped to a religious format full-time, and would not gain another competitor in that format until WDZL-TV 39 signed on in 1982.
- WCKT signed on in 1956 and was originally owned by Biscayne Television, a joint-venture between the Cox and Knight publishing families that owned the now-defunct Miami News and still active Miami Herald newspapers, respectively; with former

NBC president Niles Trammell owning 15%. This venture ended when the FCC stripped them of their licenses when it was revealed that friends of Cox made improper contact with FCC commissioner Richard Mack to influence construction permit and license awarding, resulting in Mack being found guilty of taking payoffs and being forced to resign; WPST-TV 10 (eventually WPLG) losing its license and WCKT being sold to Sunbeam Television, newly founded by the father-son team of Sydney and Edmund Ansin (the latter becoming the company president in 1971). The station, in what would be a key point later, was noted for being one of the first stations in the U.S. to air a noon newscast; in the process pre-empting NBC's 12:00 p.m. programming. At this point the most prominent personnel working at the station were longtime anchor Wayne Farris and sports anchor Lee Webb, the latter later becoming a news anchor at Jacksonville NBC affiliate WTLV before working for a number of Christian ministries; most prominently as news anchor for the 700 Club for nearly 20 years before moving on to Ligonier Ministries, founded by R.C. Sproul. WCKT would change the call letters to WSVN on June 7, 1983.

- WPLG rose out of the ashes of what had been WPST after the National Airlines-owned station went dark as part of the same FCC scandal that forced the sale of WCKT. Cincinnati-based

broadcaster L.B. Wilson won a permit for a new station on the same channel in 1961; when the station signed on as WLBW-TV 10 on November 20, one day after WPST signed off. The station was acquired by Post-Newsweek Stations; the broadcasting division of the Washington Post in 1969 and on March 16, 1970 was renamed WPLG in memory of Philip L. Graham, the late husband of that newspaper's longtime publisher, Katharine Graham - Philip Graham having committed suicide in 1963 after battling bipolar disorder – and whose younger brother, Bob Graham, was the Governor of Florida at the time the initial events in this saga took place and later serving three terms in the U.S. Senate before closing his career with a brief, unsuccessful run for the 2004 Democratic nomination for President. The station's news crew had a number of prominent personnel including the lead anchor team of Glenn Rinker and Ann Bishop; meteorologists Walter Cronise and later Don Noe; sports anchor Chuck Dowdle; reporter Dwight Lauderdale and sports reporter Roy Firestone (also known for his impressions of sports personalities such as longtime ABC college football broadcaster Keith Jackson) and by the late 1970s was fast chasing WTVJ for first place. Additionally, in 1979 WPLG became the first station in the area to use a news helicopter, known as Sky 10.

3. THE PLOT THICKENS

We now move to January 28, 1983 when the first domino fell with the death of Mitchell Wolfson (founder of WTVJ's parent company Wometco Enterprises and the first Jewish Mayor of nearby Miami Beach when he held that position from 1943-44) at the age of 82. Despite rumors of a secret plan to run the company following his death, the plan never materialized which (combined with his surviving children Mitchell Jr. and Frances Wolfson Cary - Louis Wolfson II; the eldest son and a former Florida state Representative, had died in 1979 - expressing no interest in running the company) led to the station becoming a takeover target. By September 1983; Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co. - a private equity firm - announced they would achieve the first billion dollar buyout; acquiring Wometco - which in addition to WTVJ also owned several television stations, a radio station {WLOS-FM 99.9 in Asheville, NC; which would be unloaded in 1984, briefly becoming known as WRLX from April-September 1984 before adopting its current call letters of WKSF-FM}, a number of cable systems, one of the country's largest Coca-Cola bottlers, the Florida Citrus Tower and the Miami Seaquarium - for $842 million for the total shares plus taking on approximately $170 in outstanding debt for a total price tag of $1,012,000,000 in 1984 dollars (roughly $2,430,689,586.14 in 2018

dollars) when the deal was finalized early in 1984.

KKR then spun off non-television portions of Wometco, such as the Miami Seaquarium, by selling them to management; using the proceeds to take advantage of the Federal Communications Commission increasing the ownership cap from 7 stations - with a maximum of 5 VHF (channels 2-13) - to 12) buying up the stations previously owned by Storer Broadcasting, which KKR had just taken private when Comcast began showing interest in buying that company's cable operations. Stations involved included the following (note many of these were later involved in the FOX affiliation chaos a decade afterwards):

- KCST-TV 39 (San Diego, CA; NBC {since 1977; previously ABC; Storer-owned since 1974})
- WAGA-TV 5 (Atlanta, GA; CBS {Storer-owned since 1966})
- WJBK-TV 2 (Detroit, MI; CBS {Storer-owned since its 1948 founding})
- WJKW-TV 8 (Cleveland, OH; CBS {WJW until 1977; would revert to those calls in 1985; Storer-owned since 1954})
- WTVG-TV 13 (Toledo, OH; NBC {WSPD until 1979; Storer-owned since its 1948 founding})
- WITI-TV 6 (Milwaukee, WI; CBS {ABC until 1977; Storer-owned

since 1958})

KKR would not own these stations for very long, putting the Storer stations along with WTVJ for sale in early 1986 as part of a $1.85 billion {$4,290,658,921.93 in 2018 dollars} group deal (with WTVJ going for roughly $500 million alone {$1,159,637,546.47 in 2018 dollars}, a record and much more than the station's worth).

4. THE BATTLE FOR WTVJ

This is where things start getting interesting, as the growing market naturally drew the attention of networks wanting an owned-and-operated station. CBS, despite having taken on large amounts of debt fending off a hostile takeover bid by Ted Turner, the Atlanta-based cable tycoon who was the owner at the time of WTBS-TV 17 (known as "SuperStation WTBS"); CNN; the MLB's Atlanta Braves and NBA's Atlanta Hawks and would soon rebound by acquiring MGM/UA Entertainment, eventually electing to keep the MGM pre-merger film and television library - and having unloaded St. Louis CBS O&O KMOX-TV 4, which was acquired by Belo and renamed KMOV along with making several severe cuts in personnel at CBS News, decided they were going to try to purchase WTVJ, only to lose the bidding war to the recently-merged production company Lorimar-Telepictures.

CBS, however, cited fears of extortion of clearance rights on the part of Lorimar-Telepictures (which produced CBS hits "Dallas"; "Knots Landing" and "Falcon Crest") and made an attempt to block the deal, even going so far as threatening to yank their affiliation if the deal became final. The power play succeeded with Lorimar backing out. CBS then offered to buy WTVJ for $170 million even though KKR was not considering any offers below $270 million. Unfortunately for KKR, the only other offers for WTVJ they were receiving were from companies that owned large numbers of independent stations such as Tribune Broadcasting, Pappas Telecasting and Chris-Craft Industries/United Television - all of which wanted to switch the station to either an independent or an affiliate of the newly-launched FOX network (which ended up joining WCIX).

Enter NBC. ABC was more than pleased with the performance of WPLG-TV 10, but the same could not be said for top-rated NBC, which had long been irritated with the constant preemptions by WSVN of the network's daytime lineup. NBC was the least tolerant of network preemptions than CBS or ABC (something that landed WBZ-TV 4 in Boston and KYW-TV 3 in Philadelphia; the Westinghouse or "Group W" NBC affiliates at the time, in frequent hot water with the Peacock, particularly KYW, which was the largest non-O&O NBC station at the

time but had been a ratings non-factor since the late 1970s following the breakup of their lead news team of Mort Crim {following a pit stop at Chicago CBS O&O WBBM; was eventually hired by WPLG's sister station at the time, Detroit NBC affiliate WDIV} and the late Jessica Savitch {hired by NBC News}; with KYW not becoming a local news contender in the City of Brotherly Love again until 2003, well after the dominoes toppled by the FOX-NFL deal resulted in KYW becoming a CBS O&O). To make things more frustrating for NBC, starting in 1985 most cable systems in Miami had dropped WPTV-TV 5, the NBC affiliate in nearby West Palm Beach, which also provided grade B signal coverage to the Miami-Fort Lauderdale region and ran NBC's lineup in pattern, to make room for new cable channels. NBC would offer $270 million (KKR's minimum acceptable bid) and took control in September 1987.

5. A HIDDEN SPEED BUMP

However, there was a hidden speed bump in the negotiations, as WSVN's contract with NBC meant their affiliation didn't end until New Year's Eve 1988; which could potentially force NBC to run WTVJ as a CBS affiliate for up to a year (this would not be the last time this would occur; as was seen later with the WBRC brouhaha during the New World/FOX affiliation conga). WTVJ was willing to let CBS step away,

but WSVN's owner Ed Ansin - citing NBC's top-rated prime-time lineup (consisting of, among other shows, The Cosby Show, A Different World, Family Ties, Cheers, L.A. Law, Night Court, Hunter; ALF and the Miami-based series Miami Vice and The Golden Girls) and particularly the first half of what was expected to be an especially strong sports lineup in late 1988 (with NBC carrying the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, South Korea and the 1988 World Series that would be best remembered for the thrilling Kirk Gibson winning home run in the opening game between Gibson's Los Angeles Dodgers and Oakland A's} -- WTVJ would be carrying the 1988 Fiesta and Orange Bowls on January 2 and Super Bowl XXIII; the first in 10 years to be held in the Miami area, on January 22 regardless of any protests by Sunbeam) - not surprisingly didn't want to give up WSVN's NBC affiliation one second earlier than he absolutely had to.

After WSVN briefly made a play for the CBS affiliation; WTVJ considered temporarily becoming an independent before electing to stick with CBS for the balance of 1988, creating a situation where WTVJ ran everything pre-empted by WSVN (in the process forcing the lame-duck CBS affiliate to bump some CBS shows to WCIX). CBS would then offer to purchase WCIX from ailing TVX Broadcast Group (which had just acquired WCIX and four other stations {FOX affiliate WTXF-TV 29 in Philadelphia and independents WDCA-TV 20 in Washington, D.C.;

KTXA-TV 21 in Dallas-Fort Worth and KTXH-TV 20 in Houston} from Taft Broadcasting in April 1987. Unfortunately, TVX found themselves drowning in red ink; resulting in the company selling off a number of stations {among them FOX affiliates WNOL-TV 38 in New Orleans to Quincy Jones' Qwest Productions and the company's first station, WTVZ-TV 33 in Norfolk to Sullivan Broadcasting} before ultimately being absorbed into Paramount in 1991).

One other hiccup was revealed in that WCIX's transmitter location (20 miles southwest of downtown Miami in nearby Homestead) resulting in Fort Lauderdale getting a weaker signal than WTVJ or WSVN (the location of the transmitter was chosen to protect the signals of West Palm Beach NBC affiliate WPTV-TV 5 as well as Orlando CBS affiliate WCPX-TV 6 {now WKMG}). The solution: CBS managed to successfully convince WPEC-TV 12; the ABC affiliate in nearby West Palm Beach, to flip affiliation to CBS to allow the Tiffany Network better coverage of Fort Lauderdale and northern Broward County. CBS then completed the puzzle by purchasing WCIX in August 1988. On January 1, 1989; the affiliation changes officially took place; with WTVJ jumping from CBS to NBC; WCIX moving from FOX to CBS and WSVN, late an NBC affiliate, picked up the abandoned FOX affiliation. WPLG stayed put with ABC.

The first of two post-scripts occurred nearly 20 years later. In 2008, with Miami's population becoming even more predominantly Hispanic and an increase of the population of the city speaking Spanish as a first language, NBC (in the midst of a lengthy ratings slump during much of the 2000s and early 2010s) decided to try to sell WTVJ (which had traded frequencies with WCIX in 1995; resulting in WTVJ moving to channel 6 and WCIX moving to channel 4 and being renamed WFOR. More on that in the New World/FOX follow-up) to WPLG's parent company, Post-Newsweek Stations, while keeping WSCV-TV 51; affiliated with the NBC-owned Spanish television network Telemundo; presumably resulting in WTVJ being folded into WPLG (normally in other markets, the traditional "Big 3" stations usually rank 1-2-3 in the ratings. Additionally, ever since the FCC first allowed for duopolies {where companies own two stations in the same market} in 2002 it has not allowed a company to own two of the four highest rated stations in the market); if one counted Spanish language stations WSCV and Univision affiliate WLTV-TV 23, WTVJ was the 6th rated station in Miami. However, a combination of factors including local pressure against the proposed sale, a lack of any action by the FCC and the economic downturn following the Great Recession led to the proposed sale quietly being withdrawn on December 23, 2008.

The second post-script occurred in 2025; when negotiations for

renewing WPLG's affiliation with ABC collapsed, leading to Berkshire Hathaway (which acquired WPLG from Post-Newsweek successor Graham Media Group in 2012) announcing that effective on August 4, 2025; WPLG – the one station largely unaffected by the 1980s South Florida shuffling as well as the 1995 channel swap between WTVJ and what's now WFOR – would go independent on that date, with ABC moving its affiliation to a subchannel of FOX affiliation WSVN-TV 7; with WSVN's 7.2 subchannel being branded as ABC Miami.